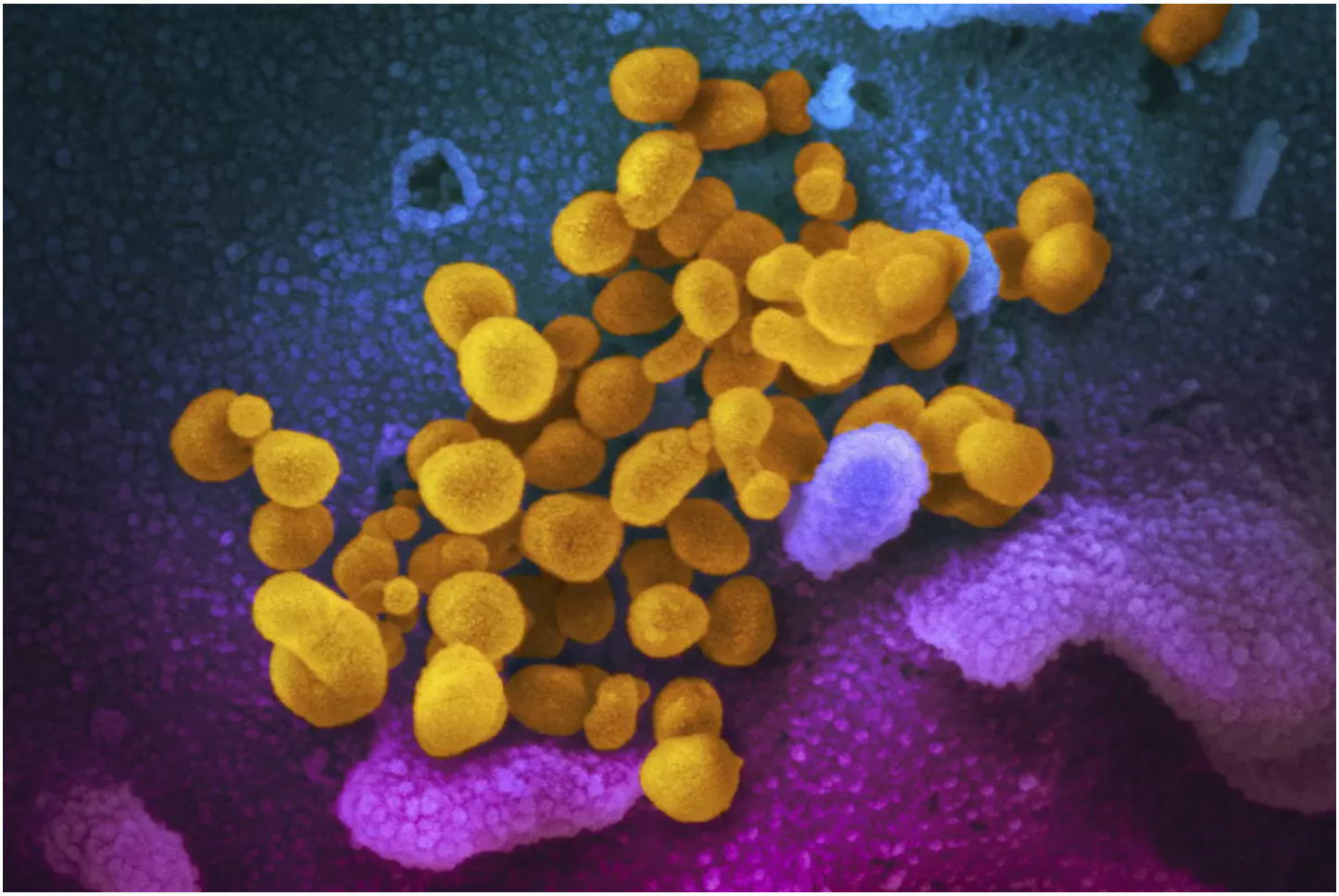
The San Diego Union-Tribune

EDITORIALS

Opinion: Study shows ‘long COVID’ likely to cause mass misery if treatments can’t be developed



This image from the U.S. National Institutes of Health shows the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, indicated in yellow, emerging from the surface of cells, indicated in blue/pink, cultured in a laboratory. (AP)

The perception that the pandemic is no longer a crisis is understandable. But COVID-19 is far from finished as a profound health threat.

BY THE SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE EDITORIAL BOARD

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Since the second half of 2022 — when nearly all local, state and federal restrictions related to COVID-19 that were adopted in early 2020 came to an end — tens of millions of Americans have returned to their old ways with gusto. Crowded bars, stadiums and trains don't even raise an eyebrow. With the number of weekly local, state and national COVID-19 hospitalizations only a small fraction of what was seen at the pandemic's height — and with only about 1 in 80 of those hospitalized dying, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — it's easy to see why so many people believe the public health crisis is now history. These statistics also to some degree make it understandable why lawmakers are losing their enthusiasm for providing taxpayer funding for more COVID-19 research, including accepting $1.3 billion in related CDC budget cuts this summer as part of negotiations over raising the debt ceiling.

But a massive new study confirms that COVID-19 — specifically, "long COVID," which can kick in well after an initial infection — remains a significant risk even for those who had the mildest of cases. The findings strongly suggest that barring the emergence of new treatments for long COVID, it will be a daunting health threat going forward to many Americans, especially older individuals.

Ziyad Al-Aly, a clinical epidemiologist at Washington University in St. Louis, led a team analyzing data from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs on the medical histories of 140,000 patients who tested positive for the COVID-19 virus in 2020. According to their report published Monday in the Nature Medicine journal, these individuals had significantly higher rates of death and many health conditions — including heart failure, diabetes, Alzheimer's disease and

depression — than 6 million patients with no confirmed infections that year. While differences between the groups lessened over time, they remained very significant — even among those whose cases were minor enough that they were never hospitalized. Elevated health risks for about 30 percent of this group remained two years later. That figure jumped to two-thirds for those who were hospitalized, who were more than twice as likely as those in the control group to be diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and were about 50 percent more likely to suffer heart failure.

Given that 103 million Americans and 770 million people worldwide have been diagnosed as having contracted COVID-19, a future of misery could await a stunningly large cross-section of humanity. This illustrates why Eric Topol — the local Scripps Research physician-scientist who has been a national resource providing informed common sense on COVID-19 — has warned for years over the dangers of ignoring the risks posed by long COVID and lobbied for more research on treatments.

Yes, Science magazine's report on Al-Aly's research included mild criticism from some academics who feared he was too ready to extrapolate risks to the general public based on the health records of veterans who were about 90 percent male and had an average age over 60. But it also included testimonials to the rigor of the research — and plenty of acknowledgments that as much as COVID-19 had been studied, and despite the development of effective treatments for initial infections, it continues to be an ominous health threat. That federal lawmakers up to President Joe Biden decided that COVID-19 research was an acceptable target for budget cuts shows awareness of this risk is receding. Such decisions could come back to haunt the nation — and to ruin the lives of many.

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